



U.S. Immigration
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Enforcement

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News Release

4 MEXICAN SMUGGLERS SENTENCED TO PRISON

Smugglers abandoned a Mexican national who was left to die under a tree

BROWNSVILLE, Texas — Four Mexican alien smugglers were sentenced Wednesday to lengthy prison terms for their role in the death from dehydration and exposure of an 18-year-old man, announced Alonzo Pena, special agent-in-charge of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in San Antonio.

Sergio Miguel Sanchez-Ojeda, 23, the leader of the smuggling operation, was sentenced to 121 months in federal prison. Maria de Jesus Ojeda, 36, also a Mexican national was sentenced to a 95-month prison term. Jose Geronimo Mendez, 21, was sentenced to 97 months in prison and is pending sentencing in McAllen, Texas, in another illegal smuggling case. The fourth and final defendant, Tirso Castillo-Arreola, 28, will be serving a total of 129 months in federal prison. In addition, Castillo-Arreola will serve 105 months in prison for his involvement in this case after he serves an 18-month prison term for a previous smuggling conviction and an additional six months for violating the conditions of his supervised release imposed on an illegal re-entry conviction. All federal prison terms are without parole.

Sergio Sanchez-Ojeda, Mendez and Castillo-Arreola are all Mexican nationals that entered the United States illegally. After completing their prison terms, they will be deported back to their home country. Maria de Jesus Ojeda, who is a legal permanent resident, will be placed in removal proceedings, upon completion of her sentence.

In April 2005, Sergio Miguel Sanchez-Ojeda and Tirso Castillo-Arreola pleaded guilty to conspiring to transport illegal aliens. Jesus-Ojeda and Geronimo-Mendez were convicted by a jury's verdict in April 2005 of transporting and harboring illegal aliens, and conspiracy to transport and harbor illegal aliens.

The evidence presented during court proceedings in July 2003 proved that Geronimo-Mendez guided a group of aliens across the Rio Grande River into the United States. Included in this group were two illegal aliens, who testified at trial. One of the two witnesses, a woman from Guatemala, testified that Geronimo-Mendez smuggled her across the Rio Grande River in an inner tube on two occasions, and attempted a third time. Once in the United States, she and others were taken to a house in Harlingen, Texas, maintained by Sergio Miguel Sanchez-Ojeda. She and others remained there for about a week.

Both witnesses testified that they provided Sanchez-Ojeda with names of relatives to contact to pay the smuggling fees. In response, the relatives sent \$600 each by Western Union to Jesus-Ojeda. During a three-month period, Jesus-Ojeda received \$28,000 through Western Union wires from around the country, including nearly \$17,000 in one month.

The second witness, a man from El Salvador, testified that after staying at the house in Harlingen, he and 15 others were driven to a brushy area south of the Hebbronville, Texas, Border Patrol Checkpoint along Highway 16. There they were guided through the brush for three days by Tirso Castillo-Arreola and given very little food and water. Witnesses described the extreme heat, and told the jury how everyone was sick and dehydrated. They also described how Jose Martin Martinez-Campos, 18, died. During the second day of the three-day trek, he died from dehydration and exposure. The smugglers instructed the illegal aliens to leave the young man's body under a tree.

The Salvadorian man became emotional while testifying about the young man dying in his arms. He told the jury that he promised the dying man he would return him to his family. Having made the promise, the Salvadorian turned himself into ICE Dallas agents.

The Salvadorian man later escorted two ICE special agents from the Dallas office to Hebbronville, Texas, to find the body of Jose Martin Martinez-Campos. The agents found the young man's body under the tree where he had been left. Working with the office of the Mexican Consulate, Martinez-Campos' body was returned to his family.

ICE Dallas agents, in coordination with agents from the Harlingen ICE office, continued their investigation, which ultimately resulted in the identification, arrest and conviction of all four defendants.

The sentences imposed on each of the four defendants include increases in the applicable sentencing guideline range by the court for the number of undocumented aliens involved in the smuggling operation, reckless endangerment of the aliens, and for the death that resulted as a consequence of the manner of transportation.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Angel Castro and Terra Bay prosecuted this case.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.